



*"Return to the past to build the future."*

# THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND





## Forefathers

Listen more often to things rather than beings.  
Hear the fire's voice,  
Hear the voice of the water,  
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.  
It is our forefathers breathing.

The dead are not gone forever.  
They are in the paling shadows,  
And in the darkening shadows.  
The dead are not beneath the ground.  
They are in the rustling tree,  
In the murmuring wood,  
In the still water,  
In the flowing water,  
In the lonely place,  
In the crowd.  
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.  
Hear the fire's voice.  
Hear the voice of the water.  
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.  
It is the breathing of our forefathers  
Who are not gone, not beneath the ground.  
Not dead.

The dead are not gone forever.  
They are in the woman's breast,  
A child's crying, a glowing ember.  
The dead are not beneath the earth.  
They are in the flickering fire,  
In the weeping plant, the groaning rock,  
The wooded place, the home.  
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.  
Hear the fire's voice,  
Hear the voice of the water.  
In the wind, hear the sobbing of the trees.  
It is the breath of our forefathers.

- Birago Diop, Senegalese poet

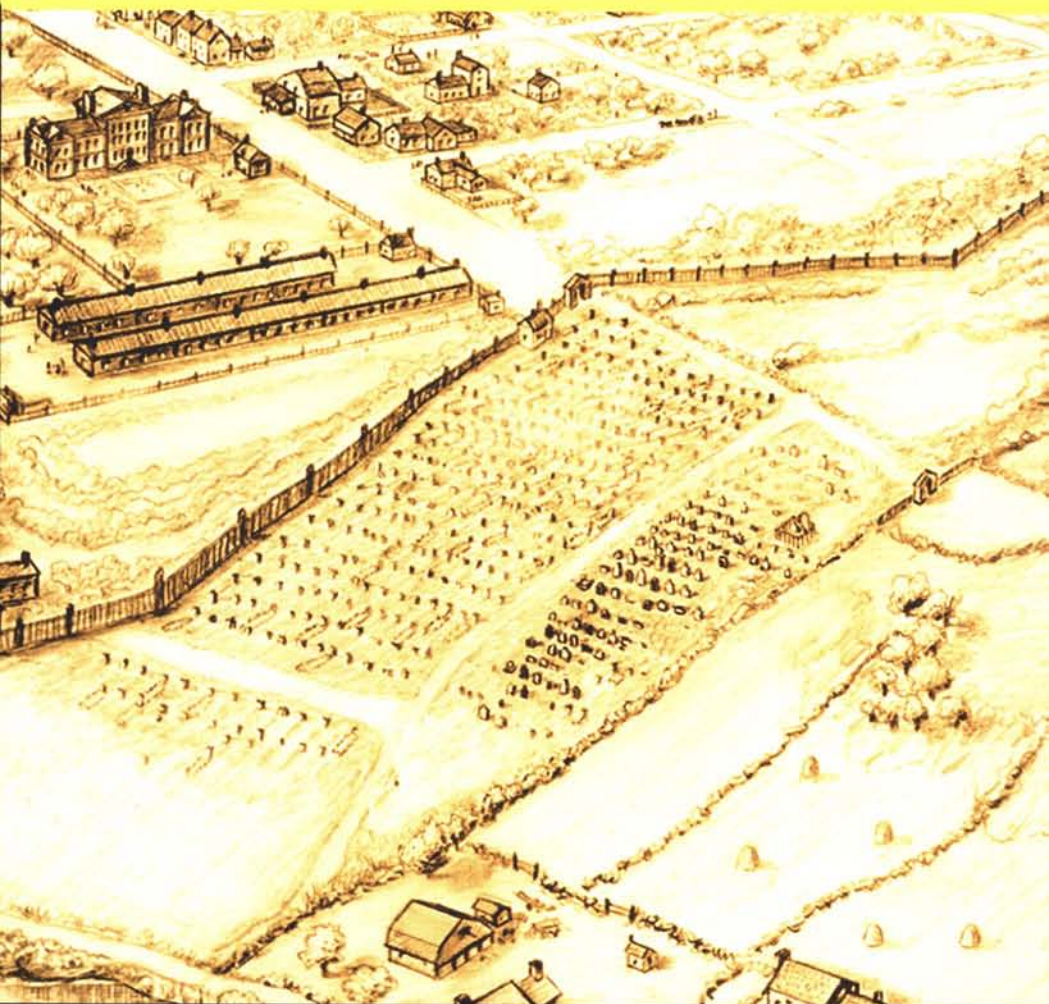


Pictured right, one of the few works of art that depict slave funerary rites, "Slave Burial," courtesy of the Historical New Orleans Collection.









## THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

The African Burial Ground is widely acknowledged as one of America's most significant archeological finds of the 20th Century. It is destined to redefine the history of one of the world's greatest cities, change the way African Americans are viewed, and, perhaps most importantly, how they view themselves.

The African presence in colonial New York is well documented, but little taught and seldom discussed. Even less has been publicized about the contribution captive African laborers, half-free farmers and freed individuals made. Their labor greatly enabled the building and prosperity of New York City. The discovery of the African Burial Ground and the multidisciplinary study of the remains prove conclusively that the second wave of arrivals to New York were captured Africans. New York's history will now have to be rewritten to reflect that these men, women and children are as much a part of it as those Europeans who came of their own free will.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the African Burial Ground came to be used by New York's African population due to a kind of

"mortuary apartheid." Africans were forbidden to bury their dead in officially consecrated graveyards such as nearby Trinity Church. Called "The Negroes Burying Ground" on maps from the period, it was a desolate five-and-a-half-acre plot north of Wall Street, outside the city limits and the protecting wall for which the street was named. Until 1794, an estimated 20,000 people were buried there, stacked layer upon layer. No marker memorialized the final resting-place of the City's first Africans and the site was paved over and forgotten as New York grew and construction of new buildings and streets increased.

In May of 1991, the site of a new Federal Office Building, just north of City Hall at Broadway and Duane Streets collided with history. Plans to erect a 34-story, \$276-million office tower with an adjoining four-story pavilion included a mandatory cultural resources survey. Since 1966, federal law has required field-testing surveys and documentary research on any construction that uses public funds. The excavation unearthed a missing chapter of New York's history, as the first of more than 400 skeletal remains of men, women and children, were discovered. Among





*Left: Among the remains found at the African Burial Ground site were those of a mother and child.*

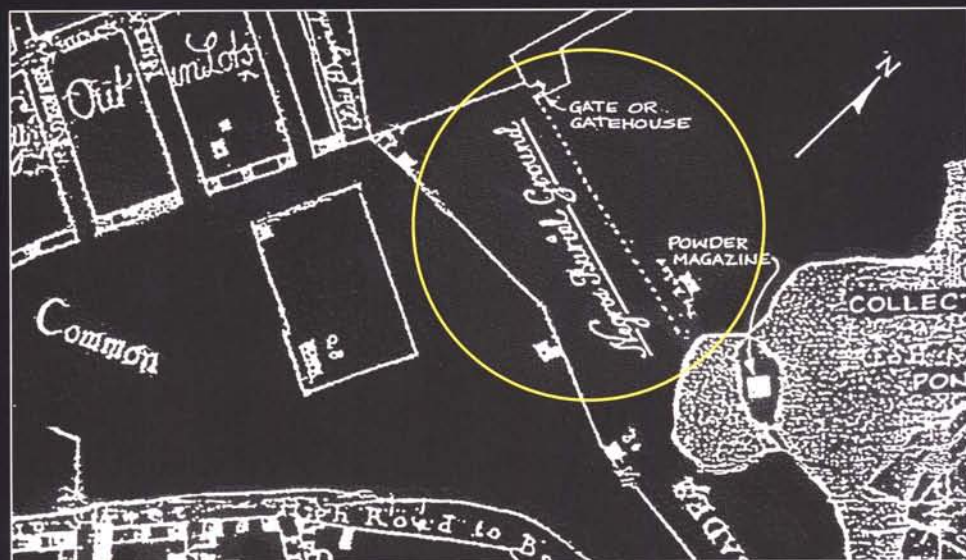
them were hundreds of burial artifacts, including many that bear witness to their constant craving for their homeland and their commitment to observe African funeral rites and traditions.

Unlike laws enacted in 1990 protecting Native American burial grounds, none existed to protect the burial grounds of Africans from desecration. Without such laws in place, the government was under no obligation to halt construction of the office tower, to stop extracting the remains from the site, or to consult with the community of African descendants. The African American community responded with immediate action and was joined by private individuals and public figures, including leaders in New York City government and Congress. Throughout 1992 persistent concerns grew into protests at the ongoing excavation.

In 1993, the African Burial Ground was designated a National Historical Landmark. On October 4, 2003 the African Ancestral remains will be re-interred at the African Burial Ground Memorial Site. This history-rich discovery has given the Ancestors buried there a voice once again. The African Burial Ground allows the Ancestors to take their rightful place in history and to leave a rich legacy to those who come after them.



*Above: Surrounded by more than two centuries of development, archaeological excavation begins. Below: The African Burial Ground was originally known as the "Negroes Burial Ground," as shown on this 17th century map.*







## THE RESEARCH

Discovery of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan sparked a controversy over the proper handling of a heritage. That the heritage belonged to a traditionally undervalued people increased the likelihood that the remains found at the African Burial Ground would not be given due reverence. It was questioned whether archaeologists and anthropologists without expertise in African culture would fully grasp the historical and cultural significance of the find and be equipped to interpret the burials.

The movement among African Americans and other people of color to control ancestral remains represents a sea change in the relationship between archaeological endeavors and communities of descendants.

Increasingly, people of color are demanding a central role in the interpretation of their own history, especially those whose histories have been neglected, misrepresented or misinterpreted

A proposal by the Cobb Laboratory of Howard University in Washington, DC, offered a research plan to implement one of the few large-scale, carefully conceived academic research endeavors focused on African Americans. The archaeological, bio-anthropological and historical study would document the conditions, customs and characteristics of the lives of 18th century Africans. Results of the inter-disciplinary effort were expected to yield information of unprecedented import to the African American community, the field of archaeology overall and contribute to a more accurate historical record of colonial America.

The primary focus of the research at Howard University has been the social and economic conditions affecting the overall health; well-being and quality of life of New York's 17th and 18th century enslaved Africans. Skeletal remains provide access to information that is otherwise unavailable. Bones can be analyzed for health and nutritional status, diet, gender and age at death. In addition to these factors, the Howard University team included as a research focus- the social history and cultural adjustment of the Africans to the North American disease environment. With more than 400 burials, researchers had a large enough sample size to account for human variation, making accurate statistical analysis possible.

Based on distinctive skeletal characteristics, researchers determined that 9 percent of the burials were children under the age of two, while another 32 percent were below the age of puberty. This indicates that the death rate among African children in colonial New York was disproportionately high. Further study showed developmental defects in the dental enamel of the children's remains resulting from malnutrition and prolonged or recurrent bouts of illness. The team also observed delayed bone development in many of the children, another indicator of poor nutritional status.

Adult remains also exhibited poor nutrition and other characteristics indicative of the rigors of slavery. Of the 59 percent of the burials that were adults, nearly



*Upper arm bone of Burial #10, a 40-year old man.*

*See detail at top of opposite page.*





*Long groove on upper  
arm bone of Burial #10,  
a 40-year old man, exhibits an  
enthesopathy, a disease process  
affecting sites where muscles are  
inserted into bone.  
Indicates chronic strain  
caused by constant  
heavy lifting and carrying.*



two-thirds were male. However, early in the research, this gender ratio was not clear because the hard labor demanded by slavery affected some women's musculoskeletal structure in such a way that initially some were thought to be males. Not surprisingly, the life expectancy of these captive Africans was short. Determined by averaging the age at death of the adults, women were found to live only into their early thirties and men into the mid-thirties. Moreover, the death rates of men and women, ages 15 to 25, were unusually high, relative to those of the English colonial population that lived to old age about eight times more often. In addition, arm, leg and shoulder bones in a significant number of adult skeletal remains show lesions called enthesopathies where muscles were torn away, further proof that the Africans were routinely worked beyond the limits of human capacity. It is noteworthy that during this period of legal and active trans-Atlantic slave trade, African fertility in colonial New York was very low, with a replacement rate of less than one per woman. The preference of slaveholders was to import new, younger slaves, rather than to encourage reproduction among the women owned, as occurred later when importation was legally forbidden.

Most Africans in New York City lived in poverty, had little and took little with them to the grave. But, what they did take serves as a cultural bridge between their lives in the New World and those they were forced to leave behind. Among the hundreds of artifacts recovered was a complex, heart-shaped design made from 93 nails on a coffin lid. Identified by an African Art historian as an Ashanti symbol called the Sankofa, it is one of several direct links among the artifacts to cultures found in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Equally meaningful is the identification of ten different filing patterns on front teeth, a rite of passage among adolescent children in many parts of West and Central Africa. One poignant cultural reference to home is a string of glass beads found with the remains of a young woman. Originally thought to be fragments of bracelets, further study revealed that the beads had been worn at her waist. The blue, green and white glass beads, believed to represent water, were meant to help her on the trip to the afterlife, back over the water to Africa and her people. Families also prepared the dead for the trip back home by adorning them with cowrie shells and often wrapped the bodies in cloth, which in at least one instance was of linen.

Our African Ancestors will rest once more, re-interred with honor in the soil of the African Burial Ground in October 2003. Howard University's team continues to finalize and prepare the research findings for publication, including the Final History Report and the Final Bio-Skeletal Report, both due in December 2003; the Final Archaeology Report, due in July 2004; and in March 2005, the Integrated and Popular Reports. Those buried in that African Burial Ground leave behind their brief visit to the 20th and 21st centuries a scientific, historical and cultural record that provides a meaningful glimpse into a world that has significance for all Americans.



*Burial #107,  
a woman in her  
late thirties. Deadly  
fracture at the base  
of her skull resulting  
from trauma or  
excessive load bearing  
on top of the head.*





## WHO THEY WERE

Nearly 300 years of silence was shattered with the discovery of the African Burial Ground allowing the Ancestors to speak out from beyond the grave about New York's colonial past. The fractured vertebrae and skeletal lesions observed in the remains of men, women and children (some as young as six years of age), provide sobering evidence of the backbreaking labor that built and sustained America's largest city. A musket ball extracted from a woman's broken ribs exposes how New York's first Africans were subjected to extreme violence.

Whether physical descendants or not, for African Americans, the remains found at the African Burial Ground represent a tangible connection to an unknown past. Indeed, for all African people of the Americas, those remains have tremendous emotional and historical significance.

The Africans brought to New York by the Dutch in the early 17th and 18th centuries came from many different regions, cultures and religions.

### # 39

Disfiguring lesions on the skeletal remains of those as young as six years of age indicate that even undernourished children were worked beyond the margins of physical capacity.

A nameless boy, known only as "#39" from the label of the box containing his skeletal remains provides the evidence. Born in New York during the 1700s, #39 died at the age of six. He might have had a West African name that means "precious," for surely he was loved. Examination of his remains show that he was lovingly laid to rest in a cedar coffin wrapped in now decayed white linen. A copper shroud pin has left a green oxidation mark on his skull. Malnourished and anemic from birth (undoubtedly due to his mother's poor state of health while pregnant), in his short life he suffered from a series of infections. Unusually heavy lifting caused overdevelopment in the anchor points of his muscles. Little #39 never had the chance to become an Ancestor. Like his fellow African Americans, he toiled and died to build New York.



Like those who lived on the European continent, they spoke different languages and had divergent world views. However, the reverence for ancestors and continuity of family were cultural elements that tended to be universal. The Sankofa, an ancient Ashanti symbol found among the remains and adopted by the African Burial Ground project, reflects this. Its meaning, "Return to the past to build the future" emphasizes how dearly Africans valued history and lineage.

Yet, this critical aspect of their humanity and identity was wrenched from them in the name of greater profit. Slave traders separated husbands, wives and children, confining them in separate holding pens, destroying forever their links to home, name and blood. Suffering from isolation, fear and grief, enslaved Africans were then subjected to the horrific Middle Passage, in which "close packing" of the Africans and brutally inadequate sanitation on the part of slave ship captains and crews led to rampant disease and death. The Middle Passage is sometimes referred to as "our Holocaust" by African Americans. Of the more than 12 million men, women and children who made that agonizing voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to colonies in the Americas, an estimated two and half million are buried in its depths. Those who survived to arrive in New York were sold at auction like chattel in the area now known as Wall Street.

### Black New York — Before Harlem

Once African American history began to be taught in American schools in the late 1960s, Harlem became synonymous with Black New York. Generally, references to slavery in America only mentioned Southern states, with the economics-driven Civil War and resulting Emancipation Proclamation presented as slavery's climax. Conventional American history taught of an African slave experience built on plantation life in the South, with slaves living in communities of shanties in the shadow of the "big house," harvesting cotton and tobacco.

For captive Africans in New York, that paternalistic model did not hold true. Unlike slavery in the South, in New York people in all walks of life, including artists, merchants, clergy, mariners and gentlemen, owned enslaved Africans. Labor was scarce in the colony with immigrants preferring to farm to earn their living. That meant the colony's economy was heavily dependent on the captive Africans who toiled at the docks loading and emptying ships, or at construction, domestic labor, farming, milling and trades that helped build the infrastructure of the city.

Dutch Colonists viewed the Africans in Lower Manhattan as human shields protecting them



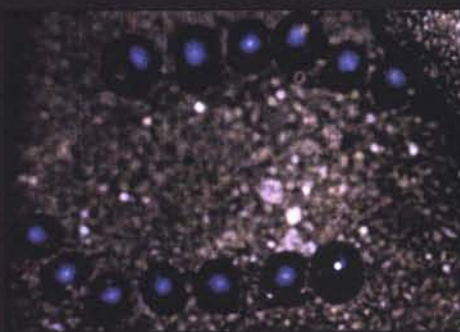


from displaced Native Americans. As a result, the colonists granted half-free status and marginal plots of land to the Africans while still forcing them to hard labor. The Africans farmed what was then marshland (now Greenwich Village), and consequently became the suppliers of a large quantity of the colony's produce.

A growing number of free Africans also made up the diverse population of eighteenth-century New York. By 1746, the Census recorded 2,444 people, or one out of five, as Black. Some were the descendants of people who had been freed by the Dutch during their tenure in what was then New Amsterdam. However, under the British rule that followed, many of the rights and privileges such as legal marriage and land ownership that were accorded to both enslaved and free Africans were rescinded. Africans became subject to a highly restrictive legal system that resulted in severe physical and social coercion. In April of 1712, this violent system of control led to a revolt by African slaves. It is believed that 21 individuals executed for their role in the revolt were buried in the African Burial Ground.

Despite such violent measures against them, captive and free Africans seized every social and economic opportunity available to build a distinct and culturally rich community. Fear of an African revolt against captivity led the colonists to enact laws that forbade the gathering of more than three slaves at any one time. Undeterred, the Africans held celebrations at night in secret. Since death amounted to the only freedom most could ever hope for, funerals also took on some of the characteristics of a celebration. Denied access to the officially consecrated graveyards by the city's racially segregated burial policies, the Africans buried their dead in the African Burial Ground.

Burial customs reflected memories of home. One such ritual involved passing an infant over the grave of the deceased to symbolize the continuation of life. Another was revealed by the discovery of a string of green, blue and white glass beads which were found to have circled the waist of a young woman's remains. The beads represented a passage over water in the afterlife, perhaps back home to Africa. Most were buried with heads pointing west, some believe to ensure that when they sat up in the Judgment, they would be facing Jerusalem. Or perhaps it was simply because their last thoughts were of Africa.



Clearly, New York's enslaved Africans were victimized. But refusing to be victims, they stubbornly clung to the remnants of home to build a rich cultural life. New York's Dutch and English clergy refused to bless African marriages so, the Africans married anyway in their own ceremonies, seeking to recreate the ordered society of home. That their children did not legally belong to them, that the horrors of slavery led to high infant mortality and morbidity, did not dissuade them from carrying on the tradition of bringing new life into the world to fill the void left by departed ancestors.





# HONORING OUR AFRICAN AMERICAN ANCESTORS

## Preparing the Remains for Their Final Rest

Care and dignity were paramount in the preparation of the remains for re-interment. For those reasons the Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA), specialists in handling fine art objects, was selected to prepare the remains for their final rest. To that end, BCA instituted specialized training in human anatomy and spiritual sensitivity awareness for both its staff and that of the Cobb Laboratory.

Employing strict art conservation standards, BCA devised a simple but elegant approach to the preparation in order to maintain respect and cultural sensitivity toward the remains. Biodegradable muslin was used to wrap the remains and each was secured with muslin tape. The ancestral remains and the specific artifacts found with them were then placed in individual coffins lined with Kente cloth. BCA was committed to replicating the placement of the remains as they were found. Each member of the staff exercised great care in placing the remains with craniums facing west. A special chart was developed to mark the remains to be re-interred as closely as possible to their original positions.



*Coffins made in Ghana hand-carved with village scenes and traditional symbols reflect a sense of homecoming.*

## A Sense of Homecoming

The coffins were fittingly commissioned from West Africa, the homeland of many of those buried in the African Burial Ground. Handmade by artisans all over Ghana, the coffins are crafted from wood native to the country and lined with cloth of Ghanaian origin. Each hand-carved coffin depicts scenes from village life or traditional symbols reflecting a sense of homecoming.

To signify closure and fulfillment, seven crypts made of African mahogany were custom-designed to hold the coffins. The crypts are constructed with tongue and groove joints rather than metal components, and like the remains themselves, will eventually return to the earth.

## Rites of Ancestral Return

The final journey for the African American Ancestors began at a ceremony at Howard University in Washington, DC. The five-day commemoration included a solemn ceremony in New York City, in which community members placed individual coffins bearing the Ancestral remains into seven crypts. Ministers from various congregations visited the site and offered prayers. Following the day of personal commemoration for the community, the crypts bearing the coffins were lowered into the ground at the burial site. The African American Ancestors were then memorialized in an emotional and moving ceremony of prayers, tributes, speeches, dance and song.







# THE FUTURE OF THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

"In all of us, there is a hunger, intense-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we came from..." Alex Haley (royal regal)

## The African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial

The African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial will be constructed at the African Burial Ground site, providing a place for reflection, contemplation and in honor those buried there. The African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial is due to be completed in September 2004. It will serve as a powerful reminder of the indomitable spirit of New York's first Africans.

## The African Burial Ground Interpretive Center

The Interpretive Center planned for the African Burial Ground will provide meaningful opportunities to educate visitors from around the world about African heritage in New York City. Multi-media exhibits and presentations designed to ensure an accurate historical framework will bring this chapter of African American history to life helping to complete the historical record and provide a concrete link to a previously obscure past. The Interpretive Center is due to be completed in October 2005.



*Africa Rising," a bronze sculpture  
by Barbara Chase Ribaud*



*"The New Ring Shout," a cosmogram by  
Houston Conwill with Estella Conwill  
and Joseph DePace*

## Artistic Tributes to the African Burial Ground

A variety of Artists have paid tribute to the African Burial Ground. These Artists were selected by the General Services Administration through its Art-in-Architecture program in response to recommendations by the Federal Seizing Committee. These works are permanently installed at the Federal Office Building at 290 Broadway in New York, New York adjacent to the African Burial Ground site. Each reflects the diversity of a creative spirit and a common homage to America's African Ancestors.

A tangible and enduring cultural and spiritual monument, the African Burial Ground will serve as a vital link to a history long disregarded and forgotten. It is possibly the only preserved, urban eighteenth century African cemetery in America and it of great significance in completing the nation's historical and cultural record.

The African Burial Ground site will also contribute substantively to New York's cultural richness, adding to an array of cultural monuments celebrating the participation of immigrant communities in the history of the city. The discovery of the African Burial Ground has had and will continue to have far reaching impact. New public recognition and interest in the role of Africans in America has led to increasing support in Congress to establish the National Museum of African American History and Culture within the Smithsonian Institution. As envisioned, the Museum will be dedicated to the collection, preservation, research and exhibition of materials that reflect the depth and breadth of the African American experience.

*"Renewal," a silk screen mural by Tomei Arai*







## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All those involved in the preservation of the African Burial Ground agreed that a historically significant project of this magnitude deserved to be treated with the utmost attention, dignity and respect, both as an eloquent testimonial to a previously silent past, and a legacy for the future.

While too numerous to list here, we extend a special thanks to all those who gave of their time, energies, expertise, commitment and prayers.

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you.”

(Attributed to Moses)

Cover Photograph Chester Higgins Jr. © 1992

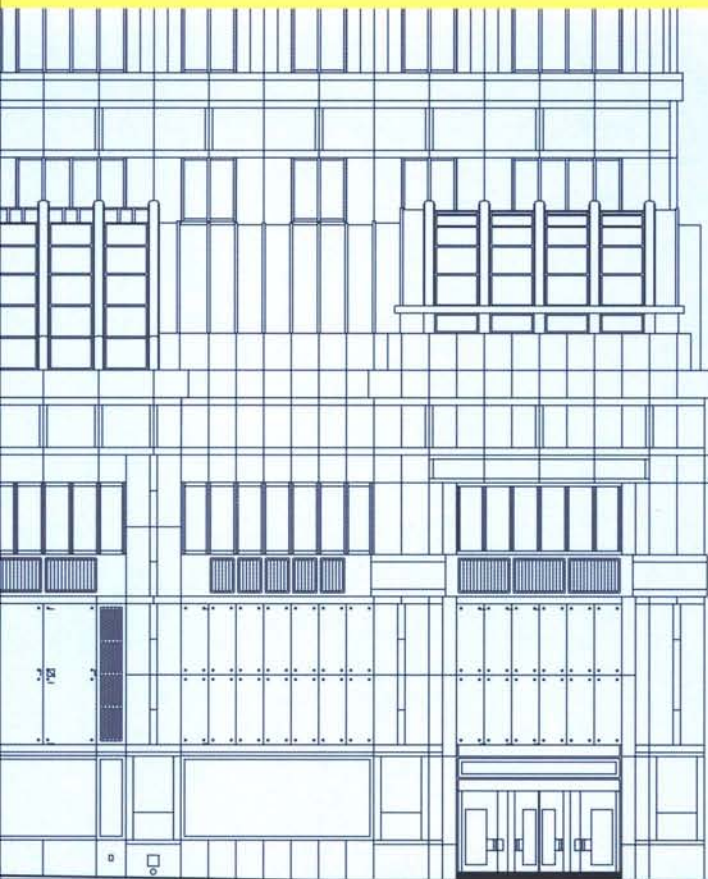
The African Burial Ground Project is fully funded by the United States General Services Administration.

Written and coordinated by Clarice Taylor © 2001

Graphic design by Michael Cooper Inc. Brand Imaging © 2001

For more information, visit [www.africanburialground.com](http://www.africanburialground.com)





FEDERAL BUILD

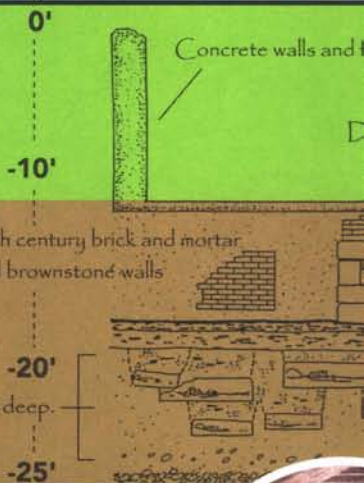
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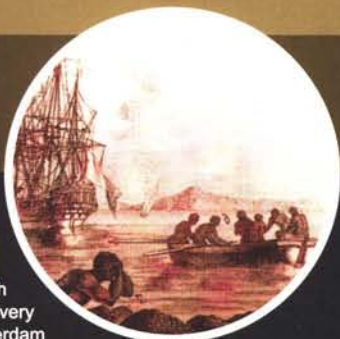
"Five Points Slum": This illustration gives us an idea what lower New York City may have looked like c. 1824.

Burials in individual coffins up to three deep.



1625

The Dutch introduce slavery to New Amsterdam



1664

The Dutch cede New Amsterdam to the British, who rename it New York. Port privileges in New York granted to ships engaged in the slave trade

1664 - 1704

Rights and privileges accorded to free Africans under the Dutch rescinded by the British

1711 Slave market opens on Wall Street and the East River



1712

New York's African population appropriates land north of Wall Street for their own burials. Now known as the African Burial Ground, it is thought to have been in use until 1794



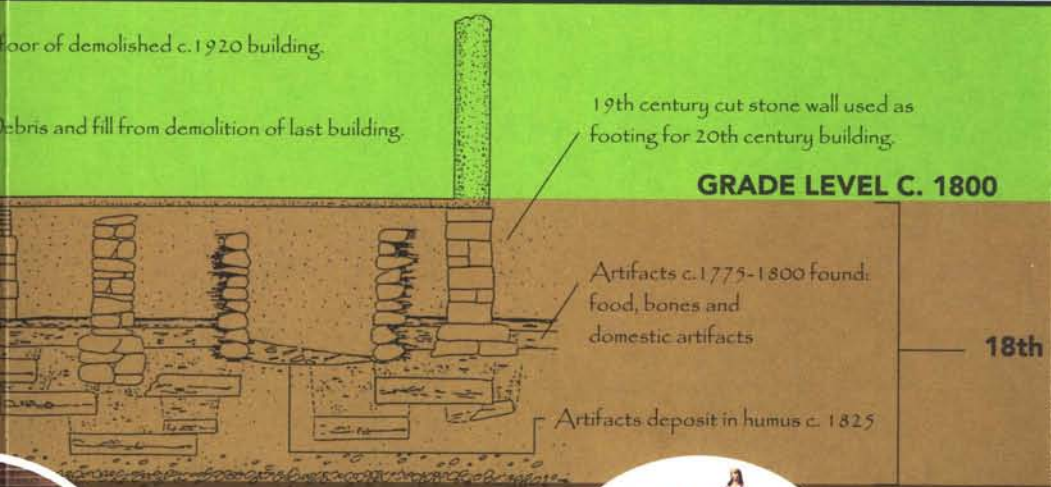
LDING AT 290 BROADWAY

PAVILION WOULD HAVE OCCUPIED THIS AREA

SCAPE BELOW WHAT IS CURRENTLY  
ET LEVEL MAY HAVE LOOKED  
HING LIKE THE DIAGRAM BELOW



CURRENT GRADE LEVEL



**1796** Chamber of Commerce  
acquires part of Burial Ground to  
lay out Chambers Street

**1746** Number of enslaved  
blacks comprise about 20  
percent of the city's residents,  
more than 2,400 in a population  
of 11,700

**1800** Vicinity of African  
Burial Ground and environs  
leveled and filled for  
construction of buildings with  
single and double basements



**1827** Emancipation Day  
in New York State takes  
effect, freeing slaves on  
July 4th

**1850s**  
expands ra  
lower Man



## Reenacting West African Burial Customs

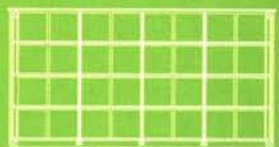
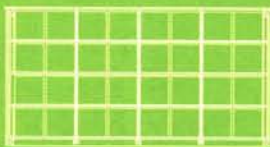
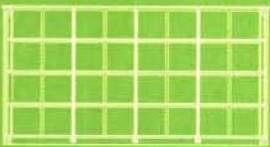
People of African descent celebrated their cultural links to West Africa through rites and rituals rooted in traditional practices.



Above: A baby is passed back and forth over a burial, symbolizing the continuation of life.



Left: In keeping with West African traditions, the Ancestors' lives and legacy are celebrated with a joyous dance at the African Burial Ground.



Seven crypts, pictured in diagram above, bearing the Ancestors' lives and legacy are celebrated with a joyous dance at the African Burial Ground.

## CENTURY

**1864**  
13th Amendment  
abolishes slavery

**1883 - 1904**  
Completion of Brooklyn  
Bridge including IRT  
Subway creates  
transportation hub in  
lower Manhattan

**1902 - 1991**  
Development continues,  
African Burial Ground  
forgotten

**May 1991** 17th and 18th  
century remains unearthed at  
construction site at 290 Broadway;  
maps of the period show it to be  
part of the "Negroes Burial  
Ground" (renamed the African  
Burial Ground)

**September 1991**  
Excavation of human remains  
begins by government contractor  
and the Metropolitan Forensic  
Anthropology Team

City  
rapidly in  
hatter

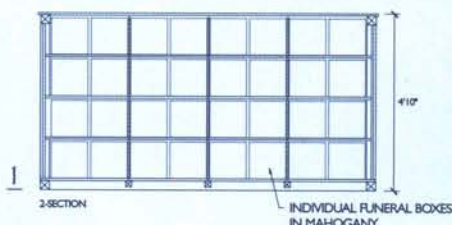




## THE RE-INTERMENT

Coffins made in Ghana hand-carved with village scenes and traditional symbols reflect a sense of homecoming.

Seven crypts custom-designed and made of African Mahogany signify closure and fulfillment.



ancestral remains are returned to their original resting place in the African Burial Ground.



**October 1992** Federal Steering Committee established for African Burial Ground



**1993** African Burial Ground granted National Historic Landmark status

**September/  
October 2003**  
Multi-City "Rites of Ancestral Return" commemorate the re-interment of Ancestral Remains at the African Burial Ground Memorial Site

**1994** Remains transferred to Howard University for scientific study

**September 1991 -  
July 1992**  
Excavation halted due to widespread public protests following the destruction of several of the burials